

The twin brothers teaching America how to swim

Outdoor Swimmer meets Thurman and Torrence Thomas, the founders of Tankproof, a non-profit organisation providing free swimming lessons and food security to American children who need it most

Words LUKE CHAMBERLAIN

Like the majority of Black children growing up in America, for twin brothers Thurman and Torrence Thomas, “swimming just wasn’t a thing that we did very often”.

“I never really had a desire to swim,” says Thurman. “It wasn’t something that was at the forefront of my mind, and none of my friends were doing it.”

“It was for people who don’t look like us,” adds Torrence – as twins they are naturally adept at finishing off one another’s sentences. “Swimming in this country is very much viewed as a white sport.”

Their relationship towards swimming soon changed though. Aged 10, Thurman almost drowned at a pool party with his baseball team. “My memory is more fluid than it is concrete,” he says. “I remember playing in the pool and everyone else on the team was swimming. Me and Torrence were the only ones that couldn’t and we were the only Black kids. I didn’t want to be the lame one who didn’t know how to swim. I wanted to be cool, so I tried to go over and make it look like I knew what I was doing. I could touch the bottom, but then my foot slipped a little bit too far and I started to panic. A lady had to jump in to rescue me and I was really embarrassed.”

Soon after, their mum managed to find a way to get Thurman and

Torrence swimming lessons. But many children in America don’t have this opportunity. According to the USA Swimming Foundation, 64% of Black and African American children have little to no swimming ability. Studies also show that for African American children aged 5-19, drowning rates are 5.5 times higher than that of Caucasian children in the same age range.

Thurman and Torrence are now the founders of Tankproof, a non-profit organisation in America working to address these statistics. The charity uses its own team of instructors and volunteers to provide underserved children with swimming lessons and food security through partnerships with swimming facilities. The pair set up Tankproof in 2012 to address in America what the UN describes as a ‘silent drowning epidemic’ among minority and low-income communities.

Over the past nine years, Tankproof has taught over 2,350 children how to swim. Last year they expanded out of Louisiana where the team are based, and ran their first out-of-state session in Austin, Texas, and then in San Francisco, California, later in the year. This year they are expanding to Los Angeles, California; Plano, Texas; Portland, Oregon, in the fall; and also New York, with ambitions to reach more communities across the country

in the future. They estimate they will teach a further 1000 children how to swim by the end of this summer.

The need to provide swimming lessons to underserved children is everywhere, says Torrence – the reality of which he and Thurman experienced as kids. Their childhood relationship with swimming is typical of many low-income households in America – and indeed the kids they now teach. Despite their mum working as a naval officer at an army base in Louisiana, “for her [swimming] really just wasn’t a priority,” says Thurman. “She was raising us by herself for a good bit of our adolescence, and so when you have to make a decision between putting food on the table and clothing your kid’s backs, versus swimming lessons, it’s always going to take the back seat.”

This is a decision many families in the US are forced to make, and one of the reasons why the USA Swimming Foundation estimates that in low-income homes, 79% of children don’t know how to swim.

Apart from a few exceptions, swimming isn’t taught through schools in America, so learning to swim depends on a family’s ability to pay anything from ~\$15 per group lesson. There are some organisations – such as the YMCA and Red Cross – that provide low-cost swim lessons, but there are few, if any, that provide them for free. The USA Swimming Foundation, the charitable arm of USA Swimming, has invested almost \$6 million in learn-to-swim grants since it formed in 2004. In 2019, they estimate their funding provided 28,627 free lessons across the country.

A proposal to provide free swimming lessons in schools was raised in Minnesota in 2015, when an education bill explored the possibility of the state becoming the first in America to provide swimming lessons in public schools. However, in 2016, the estimated \$550 million it would cost to fund the project was deemed to be too expensive, and the idea was dropped.

Torrence believes the problem in America is partly down to privatisation. “There are school swim teams, but they’re not teaching



Musicians and artists by trade, Thurman and Torrence (aka, the BROS FRESH) first began fundraising for Tankproof by designing and selling tank tops and band merch

kids how to swim. In our parish in Louisiana there's one public pool. In the neighbouring parish, which is probably the biggest in the state, there are only two. It's a privatisation issue. There's nothing wrong with private pools, but there is a problem if they're not opening their doors to help other people learn. I know how small the swim world is, because we were outside of it for over a decade. Now we're in it, we can really see both sides of it."

Tankproof are helping to address the lack of state provision for swimming lessons through partnerships with local pools. Their five-day courses are designed to teach kids how to master the basics of swimming so that they can be safe in and around water. "By the end of our courses, the kids know how to swim, can jump in the water over their head, put their eyes down, use the techniques, get themselves to the wall and be able to pull themselves out," says Thurman.

They also teach general life lessons. "What we do is give our kids the education and essentials to navigate life's currents," says Torrence. "We have to serve these kids beyond just

swimming, because this is life we're talking about here. This is a lifestyle. We teach them how to learn, how to go through adversity, how to deal with tough situations.

"The experience is holistic. When they come, they're learning interpersonal skills. We teach confidence. A lot of these kids stare death in the face when they learn to swim. And when they break through that wall? That's it. What are you afraid of now? You've taught your mind and body to do something completely foreign in five days."

"In most cases, there's not many chances where they have to mitigate high levels of stress on their own without their parents," adds Thurman. "A parent can't swim for you. These kids have to learn this themselves. If they're scared, if they're anxious, they've got to deal with it on their own."

Tankproof place a lot of emphasis on the setting of their swim camps to create a welcoming and open space to learn. "A lot of our kids don't come from the best background, so we create an environment of just raw feel-good,"

"WE HAVE TO SERVE KIDS BEYOND JUST SWIMMING, BECAUSE THIS IS LIFE WE'RE TALKING ABOUT. WE TEACH THEM HOW TO LEARN, HOW TO GO THROUGH ADVERSITY, HOW TO DEAL WITH TOUGH SITUATIONS."

says Torrence. "Studies show that that changes kids' stress levels and the way that they view themselves. We focus on everything from the music that we have playing throughout our sessions, to the balloons when they walk in, the nicely designed info cards, the towels, to the one-on-one time with the instructors that they receive. Everything has to be quality."

Tankproof's courses are proving to be life-changing for the children they teach. "One of the kids that we taught in the Dallas area recently, we were interviewing his mother after the lesson and we didn't know it at



Tankproof have their own team of instructors and volunteers, and partner with pool facilities to provide their lessons



Tankproof will provide free swimming lessons to approximately 1,000 children in America this summer alone

Image: Tankproof

the time, but he had had a near-fatal drowning accident,” says Thurman. “They found him at the bottom of this old pool. He was in hospital for days and miraculously didn’t have any brain damage or anything after. But he was so fearful of swimming. After the first couple of days with us, he went up to her and said, ‘hey mum, I can put my face in and hold my breath in the water’. The mum was crying. I was over here tearing up. Just from that story of being so close to death, to now having this gift that he can almost turn a page on that whole experience in the water – it resonates with me. I get it. I understand. And to see this all passed on positively – I love it.”

One of the difficulties Tankproof face is encouraging minority groups to engage with their courses. To do that, they have to go into the community and get to know people. “The hard part still is just breaking the stigmas around it,” says Torrence. “First of all, culturally, ‘Black people don’t swim’, so even if you have the door open, there’s apprehension. You have to be able to get these communities and almost inspire them to understand

the opportunity they have in front of them. The conversations have all been happening in homes for generations – this is why we don’t swim. There needs to be people that can go to these communities like we’ve been doing and say, look this is a skill that is important, and it should be afforded to you, and we’re going to help eliminate this barrier. Because once you learn the skill, it can enhance a whole lot.”

Tankproof enter communities through food-focussed community activations. “It’s the way we do our informationals, and it’s an introduction to these communities,” says Torrence. “We go in, feed the communities, and pass on information about Tankproof.” In the early days of the pandemic in April last year, when they couldn’t facilitate their lessons, Thurman and Torrence pivoted Tankproof to address the food security situation in their hometown in Louisiana. Soon, they were providing over 4,000 meals a month to those who needed it most.

Tankproof is almost solely financed through fundraising, which Torrence describes as a ‘constant battle’. “It’s something that you wish you didn’t

have to worry about, but it’s part of the game. You’ve got to have money to give opportunities to these kids.

“We’re now actively raising funding all the time because we’re trying to expand the services that we give and really just expand the cities that we’re in. But you can only do that with the right resources. We’re focusing on expanding our partnerships and expanding our opportunities to receive more funding and sustainability. Right now, it’s mostly from private donors, and we also have a couple of corporate donors that help.”

Thurman and Torrence have ambitions to expand Tankproof all across America. “Tankproof is an organisation that is ready to receive resources to put a direct and immediate solution to this problem,” says Torrence. “This isn’t a concept idea we’re playing with. This is almost 10 years of proven work and so we have to tell as many people as possible to help us with our cause. We can do this together. But we need help.”

Visit the Tankproof website at:
tankproof.org/